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The Blazed Trail

By STEWART EDWARD WHITE

The sealer did what he considered his duty. All day long he tramped back and forth from one gang of men to the other, keeping a sharp eye on the details of the work. His practical experience was sufficient to solve readily such problems as broken tackle, extra expedients or facility which the days brought forth. The fact that in him was vested the power to discharge kept the men at work.

Dyer was in the habit of starting for the marsh an hour or so after sunrise. The crew, of course, were at work by daylight. Dyer heard them often through his doze, just as he heard the chore boy come in to build the fire and fill the water pail afresh. After a time the fire, built of kerosene and pitchy black pine, would get so hot that in self defense he would arise and dress. Then he would breakfast leisurely.

Thus he incurred the enmity of the cook and cookee. Those individuals have to prepare food three times a day for half a hundred eaters, besides which on sleigh haul they are supposed to serve breakfast at 3 o'clock for the loaders and a variety of lunches up to midnight for the sprinkler men. As a consequence they resent infractions of the little system they may have been able to introduce.

Now, the business of a foreman is to be up as soon as anybody. He does none of the work himself, but he must see that somebody else does it and does it well. He must know how a thing ought to be done, and he must be on hand unexpectedly to see how its accomplishment is progressing. Dyer should have been out of bed at first horn blow.

One morning he slept until nearly 10 o'clock. It was inexplicable! He hurried from his bunk, made a hasty toilet and started for the dining room to get some sort of a lunch to do him until dinner time. As he stepped from the door of the office he caught sight of two men hurrying from the cook camp to the men's camp. He thought he heard the hum of conversation in the latter building. The cookee set hot coffee before him. For the rest he took what he could find cold on the table.

Dyer sat down, feeling for the first time a little guilty. This was not because of a sense of a dereliction in duty, but because he feared the strong man's contempt for inefficiency.

"I sort of pounded my ear a little long this morning," he remarked, with an unwonted air of bonhomie.

The cook creased his paper with one hand and went on reading.

"I suppose the men got out to the marsh on time," suggested Dyer, still easily.

The cook laid aside his paper and looked the sealer in the eye.

"You're the foreman; I'm the cook," said he. "You ought to know."

Dyer was no weakling. The problem presenting, he rose to the emergency. Without another word he pushed back his coffee cup and crossed the narrow, open passage to the men's camp.

"How's this, men?" cried Dyer sharply

When he opened the door a silence fell. He could see dimly that the room was full of lounging and smoking lumbermen. As a matter of fact, not a man had stirred out that morning.

"How's this, men?" cried Dyer sharply. "Why aren't you out on the marsh?"

No one answered for a moment. Then Baptiste:

"He mak' too tam cole for de marsh. Meester Radway he spik dat we kip off dat marsh w'en he mak' cole."

Dyer knew that the precedent was indisputable.

"Why didn't you cut on 'eight' then?" he asked still in peremptory tones.

"Didn't have no one to show us where to begin," drawled a voice in the corner.

Dyer turned on his heel and went out.

The crew worked on the marsh that afternoon and the subsequent days of the week. They labored conscientiously, but not zealously. The work moved slowly. At Christmas a number of the men "went out." Most of them were back again after four or five days, for while men were not plenty neither was work. The equilibrium was nearly exact.

But the conviviais had lost to Dyer the days of their debauch. Instead of keeping up to 50,000 a day, as Radway had figured was necessary, the scale would not have exceeded 30,000.

CHAPTER VII.

RADWAY returned to camp by the 6th of January. He went on snowshoes over the entire job and then sat silently in the office smoking. The jobber looked older. The lines of dry good humor about his eyes had subtly changed to an expression of pathetic anxiety. He attached no blame to anybody, but rose the next morning at horn blow, and the men found that they had a new master over them.

Now it became necessary to put the roads in shape for hauling. All winter the blacksmith had occupied his time in fitting the iron work on eight log sleighs which the carpenter had hewed from solid sticks of timber. They were tremendous affairs, with runners six feet apart and bunks nine feet in width for the reception of logs.

The carpenter had also built two immense tanks on runners, holding each some seventy barrels of water and with holes so arranged that on the withdrawal of plugs the water would flood the entire width of the road. The sprinklers were filled by horse power. A chain running through blocks attached to a solid upper framework, like the open belfry of an Italian monastery, dragged a barrel up a wooden track from a water hole to an opening in the sprinkler. When in action this formidable machine weighed nearly two tons and resembled a moving house. Other men had felled two big hemlocks, from which they had hewed beams for a V plow.

The V plow was now put in action. Six horses drew it down the road, each pair superintended by a driver. The machine was weighted down by a number of logs laid across the arms. Men guided it by levers and by throwing their weight against the fans of the plow. It was a gay, animated scene, this, full of the spirit of winter—the plodding, straining horses, the brilliantly dressed, struggling men, the sullen yielding snow thrown to either side, the shouts, warnings and commands. To right and left grew white banks of snow. Behind stretched a broad white path in which a scant inch bid the bare earth.

For some distance the way led along comparatively high ground. Then, skirting the edge of a lake, it plunged into a deep creek bottom between hills. Here earlier in the year eleven bridges had been constructed, and perhaps as many swampy places had been "corduroyed" by carpeting them with long parallel poles. Now the first difficulty began.

Some of the bridges had sunk below the level, and the approaches had to be "corduroyed" to a practicable grade. Others again were humped up like tomcats and had to be pulled apart entirely.

Still that sort of thing was to be expected. A gang of men who followed the plow carried axes and cant hooks for the purpose of repairing extemporaneously just such defects which never would have been discovered otherwise than by the practical experience. Radway himself accompanied the plow. Thorpe, who went along as one of the "road monkeys," saw now why such care had been required of him in smoothing the way of stubs, knots and hummocks.

When the road had been partly cleaned Radway started one of his sprinklers. Water holes of suitable size had been blown in the creek bank by dynamite. There the machines were filled. Stratton attached his horse to the chain and drove him back and forth, hauling the barrel up and down the slide way. At the bottom it was capsized and filled by means of a long pole shackled to its bottom and manipulated by old man Heath. At the top it turned over by its own weight. Thus seventy odd times.

Then Fred Green hitched his team on and the four horses drew the creaking, cumbrous vehicle spouting down the road. Water gushed in fans from the openings on either side and beneath and in streams from two holes behind. Not for an instant as long as the flow continued dared the teamsters breathe their horses, for a pause would freeze the runners tight to the ground. A tongue at either end obviated the necessity of turning around.

That night it turned warmer. The change was heralded by a shift of wind.

"She's goin' to rain," said old Jackson. "The air is kind o' holler."

"Hollow?" said Thorpe, laughing. "How is that?"

"I don' know," confessed Hines, "but she is. She just feels that way."

In the morning the icicles dripped from the roof, and the snow became pockmarked on the surface.

Radway was down looking at the road.

"She's holdin' her own," said he, "but there ain't any use putting more water on her. She ain't freezing a mite. We'll plow her out."

So they finished the job and plowed her out, leaving exposed the wet, marshy surface of the creek bottom, on which at night a thin crust formed.

"She'll freeze a little tonight," said Radway hopefully. "You sprinkler boys get at her and wet her down."

Until 2 o'clock in the morning the four teams and the six men creaked back and forth spilling hardly gathered water. Then they crept in and ate sleepily the food that a sleepy cookee set out for them.

By morning the mere surface of the sprinkled water had frozen. Radway looked in despair at the sky. Dimly through the gray he caught the tint of blue.

The sun came out. Nuthatches and woodpeckers ran gayly up the warming trunks of the trees; blue jays fluffed and perked and screamed in the hardwood tops; a covey of grouse ventured from the swamp and strutted vainly, a pause of contemplation between each step. Radway, walking out on the tramped road of the marsh, cracked the artificial skin and thrust his foot through into icy water. That night the sprinklers stayed in.

The devil seemed in it. Men were lying idle; teams were doing the same. Nothing went on but the days of the year, and four of them had already ticked off the calendar. The deep snow of the unusually cold autumn had now disappeared from the tops of the stumps. It even stopped freezing during the night. At times Dyer's little thermometer marked as high as 40 degrees.

"I often heard this was a sort 'v summer resort," observed Tom Broadhead, "but hanged if I knew it was a summer resort all the year round!"

By and by it got to be a case of looking on the bright side of the affair from pure reaction.

"I don't know," said Radway, "it won't be so bad, after all. A couple of days of zero weather, with all this water lying around, would fix things up in pretty good shape. If she only freezes tight we'll have a good solid bottom to build on."

The inscrutable goddess of the wilderness smiled and calmly, relentlessly, moved her next pawn.

It was all so unutterably simple and yet so effective. It snowed.

All night and all day the great flakes zigzagged softly down through the air. Radway plowed away two feet of it. The surface was promptly covered by a second storm. Radway doggedly plowed it out again.

This time the goddess seemed to relent. The ground froze solid. The sprinklers became assiduous in their labor. Two days later the road was ready for the first sleigh, its surface of thick, glassy ice beautiful to behold, the ruts cut deep and true, the glades sanded or sprinkled with retarding hay on the descents. At the river the banking ground proved solid. Radway breathed again, then sighed. Spring was eight days nearer. He was eight days more behind.

As soon as loading began the cook served breakfast at 3 o'clock. The men worked by the light of torches, which were often merely catchup jugs with wicking in the necks. Nothing could be more picturesque than a teamster conducting one of his great pyramidical loads over the little inequalities of the road, in the ticklish places standing atop with the bent knee of the Roman charioteer, spying and forestalling the chances of the way with a fixed eye and an intense concentration that relaxed not one inch in the miles of the haul. Thorpe had become a full fledged cant hook man.

He liked the work. There is about it a skill that fascinates. A man grips suddenly with the hook of his strong instrument, stopping one end that the other may slide. He thrusts the short, strong stock between the log and the skid, allowing it to be overrun. He stops the roll with a sudden sure grasp applied at just the right moment to be effective. Sometimes he allows himself to be carried up bodily, clinging to the cant hook like an acrobat to a bar, until the log has rolled once, when, his weapon loosened, he drops lightly, easily to the ground. And it is exciting to pile the logs on the sleigh, first a layer of five, say; then one of four smaller, of but three, of two, until at the very apex the last is dragged slowly up the skids, poised and just as it is about to plunge down the other side is gripped and held inexorably by the little men in blue flannel shirts.

Chains bind the loads. And if ever during the loading or afterward when the sleigh is in motion the weight of the logs causes the pyramid to break down and squash out, then woe to the driver or whoever happens to be near. For this reason the loaders are picked and careful men.

At the banking grounds, which lie in and about the bed of the river, the logs are piled into a gigantic skidway to await the spring freshets, which will carry them down stream to the "boom." In that inclosure they remain until sawed in the mill.

Thorpe, in common with the other men, had thought Radway's vacation at Christmas time a mistake. He could not but admire the feverish animation that now characterized the jobber. Every mischance was as quickly repaired as aroused expedient could do the work.

Esprit de corps awoke. The men sprang to their tasks with alacrity, gave more than an hour's exertion to each of the twenty-four, took a pride in repulsing assaults of the great enemy whom they personified under the generic "She."

One morning in February Thorpe was helping load a big butt log. He was one of the two men who stand at either end of the skids to help the ascending log keep straight and true to its bed on the pile. His assistant's end caught on a sliver, ground for a second and slipped back. Then the log ran slanting across the skids instead of perpendicular to them. To rectify the fault Thorpe dug his cant hook into the timber and threw his weight on the stock. He hoped in this manner to check correspondingly the ascent of his end. In other words, he took the place on his side of the preventing sliver, so equalizing the pressure and forcing the timber to its proper position. Instead of rolling the log slid. The stock of the cant hook was jerked from his hands. He fell back, and the cant hook, after clinging for a moment to the rough bark, snapped down and hit him a crushing blow on the top of the head.

They took Thorpe up and carried him in, just as they had carried Hank Paul before. Men who had not spoken a dozen words to him in as many days gathered his few belongings and stuffed them awkwardly into his satchel. Jackson Hines prepared the bed of straw and warm blankets in the bottom of the sleigh that was to take him out.

"He would have made a good boss," said the old fellow. "He's a hard man to nick."

CHAPTER VIII.

WHEN Thorpe finally came to himself he was in a long, bright, clean room, and the sunset was throwing splashes of light on the ceiling over his head.

He watched them idly for a time, then turned on his pillow. At once he perceived a long, double row of clean white painted iron beds, on which lay or sat figures of men. Other figures of women glided here and there noiselessly. They wore long, spreading dove gray clothes, with a starched white kerchief drawn over their shoulders and across the breast. Their heads were quaintly white-garbed in stiff winglike coifs, fitting close about the oval of the face. Then Thorpe sighed comfortably and closed his eyes and blessed the chance that he had bought a hospital ticket of the agent who had visited camp the month before. For these were sisters, and the young man lay in the hospital of St. Mary.

Like a great many other charities built on a common sense, self supporting, rational basis, the woods hospitals

"I see," said Thorpe wearily

are under the Roman Catholic church. From one of the numerous agents who periodically visit the camps the lumber jack purchases for $8 a ticket which admits him at any time during the year to the hospital, where he is privileged to remain free of further charge until convalescent. So valuable are these institutions and so excellently are they maintained by the sisters that a hospital agent is always welcome even in those camps from which ordinary peddlers and insurance men are rigidly excluded.

In one of these hospitals Thorpe lay for six weeks suffering from a severe concussion of the brain. At the end of the fourth his fever had broken, but

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